

# Institutional Collaboration, Learning and Context: A Case Study of Tasmanian Information Technology Institutions

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## Declaration of Originality

This thesis contains material that is original, except where due acknowledgement has been given. Material in this thesis has not been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University of Tasmania or any other institutions, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in this thesis. To the best of my knowledge I believe that no material previously published or written by another person is cited except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis.

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## ABSTRACT

With increasing devolution of governance, collaboration has become ever more important as a means for community groups, regions and institutions to meet their needs. Firms also use a variety of collaborative arrangements to meet their need to compete effectively in local and global markets. However, for all the growth in collaborative activity, there are many fraught or failed attempts suggesting a need to better understand the processes of collaboration. This thesis contributes to our understanding of institutional collaboration, focusing on institutional collaborative activity, learning and context. Collaboration is not considered as a stand-alone activity, but as an activity that is a learning process influenced by context.

Context, institutional collaboration and learning are generally treated as separate components or processes. Furthermore, context is often depicted as that which is external to phenomena, but which impacts on the phenomena. Activity theorists, however, generally recognise context as being intrinsic to activity, noting the mediation of context within the contradictions of the activity. However, Cultural Historical Activity Theory tends not to explore the mediating influence of context as social relations of the mode of production and historical trajectories beyond acknowledging these influences. Rarely is the mediation of economic, social, political and ideological influences arising from the social relations of production explored in depth. In this thesis, these mediating influences are termed contextual conditions and include the mode of production, dominant discourses, policy, industry development, regional infrastructure and institutional arrangements analysed. The mediating influence of contextual conditions on institutional collaborative activity contributes significantly to our understanding of institutional collaborative activity.

A case study methodology of information technology institutions and their collaborative activity between 2002 and 2004 in a small regional state of Australia is used in this thesis. Cultural Historical Activity Theory is used to develop data collection tools and to analyse the data. Engeström's (2004) advice to follow the object when studying interaction between institutions is employed as a key data

collection and analytical tool. A focus on a developing Marine Information, Communications and Technology Cluster and the involvement of three key Tasmanian information technology institutions is used to analyse how contextual conditions mediate collaborative activity and learning.

Within the limitations of a case study, this thesis contains important lessons for policy makers. Analysing the influence of contextual conditions on collaborative activity becomes a tool for policy makers in identifying where their efforts and resources might best be placed. In a small regional State for instance, it was evident that there were limited institutional arrangements in place at the time data was collected. It was evident there was a role for state government policy makers to assist development of the industry and its collaborative capability. This would include encouraging the development of relations and exchange between institutions such as the employer, research and government institutions. Such a role would potentially increase the capacity of a small industry. However, without a tool such as analysis of analysing the influence of context on collaborative activity, this role was not apparent to those involved.

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